Islam in Aru, Indonesia

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ISLAM IN ARU, INDONESIA
Oral traditions and Islamisation processes from the early modern period to the present

Emilie Wellfelt and Sonny A. Djonler

ABSTRACT
The coming of Islam in eastern Indonesia is generally assigned to the activities of Muslim traders from the late 15th century onwards. This assumption is an over-simplification, especially in areas outside the main trade centres. In the Aru islands, Islam was introduced by the mid 17th century. We argue that Islamisation in Aru was initially a matter of internal considerations, rather than trade. We present oral traditions about the expansion of Islam as seen from two locations: Ujir, the historical Muslim centre in Aru on the west coast, and Benjuring, a former stronghold of local ancestral beliefs in the east. The oral sources are juxtaposed with European accounts of the 17th century when Muslim and Protestant centres first developed in Aru. The coming of Islam forced people to either convert or leave for non-Muslim areas. By late colonial times (early 20th century), both Islam and the Protestant church had reached remote villages. The most recent wave of conversions in Aru to state-approved world religions took place in the 1970s. In the last 30 years, the population in Aru has grown, especially in the regency capital Dobo. While Muslims used to be a small minority in Aru with their main centre on Ujir island, the point of gravity has shifted to Dobo, a fast-growing town with a large influx of mostly Muslims from other parts of Indonesia. Islamisation is still ongoing in Aru and the character of Islam is changing.

KEYWORDS
Aru; conversion; Islam; Maluku; oral traditions

Introduction
The historian Merle Ricklefs (2008: 3) has remarked that ‘[t]he spread of Islam is one of the most significant processes of Indonesian history, but also one of the most obscure’. This is true for well known historical kingdoms in Indonesia, today the most populous Muslim country in the world. The enigma is no less the case in the periphery, especially in places without centralised power, such as the Aru islands.

In the 17th century, if not earlier, some indigenous groups in Aru embraced Islam. The two islands Wasir and Ujir were at the easternmost reach of Islam in island Southeast Asia. The main purpose of this article is to explore living oral traditions that describe the coming of Islam to this frontier area. Oral traditions about Islamisation in Aru emphasise that...
conversion had, and still has, a processual character. The narratives stress that the introduction of Islam deeply affected both the growing number of Muslims and the non-Muslims interacting with them. Both Muslim and non-Muslim sources describe how expansion of Islam from the 17th century until the present has caused chains of resettlement of those who chose not to convert.

The Aru archipelago consists of low-lying islands, segmented by a series of tidewater channels. These waterways, while difficult to navigate, are still the main arteries for communication between west and east Aru. The east is often referred to as the Backshores (Indonesian: belakang tanah). There is a distinct difference between the west coast that faces open sea and the east coast with many small islands, vast intertidal zones, and shallow waters across to New Guinea. Aru sits on the edge of the same continental shelf as New Guinea and Australia (Figure 1).

We focus on oral traditions from two areas in Aru (Figure 2). These are (i) the small islands Wasir and Ujir in the northwest which was historically the Muslim centre of Aru, and (ii) the six islands in the Batuley area on the east coast of the archipelago, where we draw specifically on traditions from a branch of the Djonler clan who claim they used to live in Ujir island until they were forced to choose between converting to

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1Patricia Spyer (2000: 5) argues that belakang tanah has both topographical and derogatory connotations – as in ‘being backward’.
Islam or leaving. In Batuley, part of the population resisted world religions until the 1970s when there was a government-driven forced conversion to state-sanctioned religions.²

Muslim conversion in the Indonesian context

There has been much speculation about the Islamisation of Indonesia. Scanty evidence opens up questions on who introduced Islam and when this took place. Arab, Indian

²Ujir and Batuley are also separate languages. Ujir is spoken by parts of the community in Ujir village and by a few people in the village of Samang. Batuley is spoken on the islands of Aduar, Kumul, Batuley, Waria, Sewer and Jurusiang.
and Chinese Muslims were present early on, it seems without attracting new followers. The Chinese court began to receive Muslim emissaries from Arabia in the mid 7th century. Muslims travelled through the area for almost 600 years before the earliest evidence of Indonesian Muslims appears in the form of a gravestone in north Sumatra dated 1211 AD (Ricklefs 2008: 3-4). One set of questions revolves around the recipients: why, how and by whom was the new religion embraced? Ricklefs (ibid) has suggested that two general processes took place, often in conjunction. On the one hand, indigenous Indonesians came in contact with Islam and decided to convert, on the other, foreign Muslims settled somewhere in Indonesia, intermarried and adopted local lifestyles but maintained their religion. Both these basic models are present in the Aru case.

In 1979 Russell Jones published ten conversion myths from Indonesia and the Malay world, from Sumatra in the west to Ternate in the east. He found that the traditions about conversion tended to pivot on a ruler and involve supernatural experiences as part of the conversion. Jones argued that the idea of abrupt conversions is probably a borrowing from hagiographical literature of Islam, rather than being part of pre-existing local tropes (Jones 1979: 154). One could add that Muslim conversion practices that enhance the importance of the confession of faith in themselves represent conversion as an event.

When taking European written accounts into the picture, using Ternate in north Maluku as a specific example, Jones found that conversion might be an event for the ruler but that turning the people into Muslims was a gradual process. He concluded that this gradual change ‘emphasizes the very arbitrary nature of giving a “conversion date” for these Indonesian states’ (Jones 1979:155).

In contrast with the places Jones wrote about, Aru had no traces of state formation, royal lineage or ruler to pivot on. The one individual who stands out in the conversion stories is the [holy] man who brought Islam to Wasir-Ujir. The conversion narratives describe a community becoming Muslim in a process that took time. However, at some point each individual had to make a choice: convert or move.

The historian Richard W. Bulliet, who specialises in the history of Islam and the Muslim world, has argued that the varying ways in which researchers understand conversion will affect their theoretical and methodological approach. He rightfully points to the importance of appreciating stages of conversion, and of acknowledging the diversity that can be encapsulated under the label ‘Islam’. Bulliet (2010: 529) argues that ‘studies of conversion often take it for granted that converts to Islam move from one known entity to another, while in fact both Islam and the religions from which new converts come change over time and in response to their relative position in society.’ Being the first individual in a community to convert is different from being the last. Furthermore, Islam is not the same in a first contact situation compared with Islam in a community where people have long experience of exposure to the religion. The dominant narrative about Islamisation in Southeast Asia speaks of Islam following in the footsteps of Muslim traders. The connection between trade and Islam is indisputable, but as Ricklefs (2008: 7) has pointed out, Islam was present for centuries in island Southeast Asia without conversions taking place.

In the case of Aru, the expansion of Islam happened in close correlation with the spread of the Protestant religion. Early developments in northwest Aru resonate with religious change in Ambon during the 16th century, a period of Portuguese Catholic mission in Maluku. Recent research shows that the common discourse about Europeans converting
people in Maluku to Christianity is misleading – the mission was to a great extent driven by indigenous interests. In the case of Ambon, being Christian was a new identity that could bridge old enmities. This new uniting force also involved pinpointing a new enemy – the Moors (Baker 2012).

Methodology: documenting oral traditions

The oral accounts we present here were documented in recent years. The narratives stretch from mythical time to lived experience. The premises for documentation have differed between Wasir-Ujir and Batuley. Wellfelt is a Swedish ethnohistorian who worked with people from Ujir village in 2013–2018. During five periods of fieldwork, each lasting between two weeks and three months, she documented the endangered language Ujir, and oral traditions about local history. This kind of material can only be shared by senior [male] persons with hereditary rights to specific stories. Knowledge of the traditions about Wasir are the exclusive right of certain lineages with ancestral land rights in the island. Ujir traditions are owned in similar ways. The coming of Islam is a specific historical category that follows along a patrilineage whose members are the keepers of an old Qur’an said to have been brought to Wasir-Ujir by the holy man who settled there and introduced Islam. The material from Wasir-Ujir was video- or sometimes audio-recorded by Wellfelt, with the purpose of archiving the material for the future. Wellfelt has also worked on European sources for Aru history.

The co-author Djonler is a native-speaker of Batuley and a member of the Djonler clan in Benjuring. Djonler has an active interest in history and culture in the Aru islands, but he is not yet a senior man in his clan, which is normally a prerequisite for knowing and sharing oral traditions. In 2010, when Djonler ran for the post of vice head of regency (wakil bupati), the elders in Batuley decided to share important oral traditions with him as a preparation for the campaign. For this article, Djonler made a series of complementary interviews, mainly taking notes. We have tried to make use of the different points of departure of the authors, one being an external person with professional training in the fields of anthropology and history, the other being an insider with deep knowledge about traditions and life conditions in Aru, and with an extensive network of informants to hand.

It is important to note the limitations and the possibilities of oral sources, but this also goes for the written record. We do not claim that the oral traditions presented here represent an absolute truth, though in the indigenous context in Aru they would be classified as true stories about the past. In Aru, it is considered dangerous to talk about history. Senior men can do this, but they need to be careful and truthful, otherwise they run the risk of premature death.

The accuracy of oral traditions as historical sources is a controversial subject. We argue that the local traditions presented here are important documents showing culturally informed contemporary understandings of the past, and of experiences of the still ongoing Islamisation process. This does not mean we disregard history in the western academic tradition. When we have juxtaposed oral accounts from Aru with archival sources

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3For genres in oral traditions see Vansina (1985: 79f).
4A discussion of the concept ‘truthfulness’ in the context of indigenous historiography is found in Wellfelt (2016: 16–20).
of European origin there are differences, but also interesting similarities. For instance, both tell us about a time when the village of Ujir was divided between Muslims and adherents of local ancestral beliefs.

**Situating Aru: religion and religiosity in the southerly trade zone**

As anthropologist Roy Ellen (2003) has convincingly argued, Maluku consisted historically of three trading zones that existed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, perhaps earlier, with established continuations in some form into the present. Each trade zone, (north, central, and south) was ‘focused on a densely populated spice-producing centre, dependent upon an extensive sago-producing periphery’ (Ellen 2003: 10). The centre of the southerly zone is Banda, where the sought-after spices nutmeg and mace originated. Banda’s periphery encompassed, from west to east: southeast Seram, the Kei islands, Aru, and parts of New Guinea.

The earliest mention of Aru in European sources is in the accounts of the Portuguese Tomé Pires (1944). In the years 1512–1515, immediately after the Portuguese had taken Malacca, he assessed trade possibilities in the Indonesian archipelago. Pires mentioned that birds of paradise (Port. passaros de Deus) originating from Aru were traded through Banda, from where they reached the Muslim world: Bengali merchants traded in this rare commodity, which was used by Turks and Persians to adorn headdresses (panaches; Pires 1944: 209). Banda did not have kings; instead the villages on these islands were ruled by elders. Along the coast lived Muslim traders; according to Pires (1944: 206), it was ‘thirty years since there began to be Moors in the Banda islands’.

Writing about the Dutch spice monopoly and religious change in 17th century Maluku, the Dutch historian Hendrik Niemeijer (2001: 257) claims that around the year 1600, with the exception of the islands of southeast Seram, the periphery of Banda was not Islamised because ‘Muslim merchants considered Banda as the central trading place of the region.’ In the early 17th century the Dutch, or rather the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (hereafter VOC), emerged as the new dominant European power in Maluku. Their aim was to gain a monopoly over the spice trade. In 1621, the VOC made a devastating attack on Banda to this end. The inhabitants in Banda were either killed or captured or they fled, and Banda was no longer a Muslim trading place. By 1622, the VOC had posted four ministers in Banda. Their first task was to set up a colonial society based on Calvinist morals and Christian beliefs there; it took some time before Protestant mission was directed towards the periphery (Niemeijer 2001: 270-71).

In 1623, the earliest known European source reported first-hand impressions from northwest Aru, including Ujir. According to this source, the people in Aru worshipped the sun and the sea. There is no mention of Islam (Dijk et al. 1859). In 1628, leaders (Malay: orangkaya) from Kei and Aru came to Banda to request VOC assistance as they felt threatened by neighbours and by Makassar traders. The VOC sent the first Protestant missionary to Aru in 1656. However, he was soon summoned back to Banda, accused of trading in slaves and pearls. Protestant missionary activities were resumed in 1669, in response to Muslim activities in Aru. When the governor in Banda learnt that some orangkaya from Ujir had requested Islamic teachers from Hitu, a Muslim centre in Ambon, he decided to send a new missionary to Aru: ‘The harmful sect of Muhamed … threatens to make its adherents enemies of our nation’ (Niemeijer 2001: 270).
One report about Aru, dated 1670, describes the population in general as ‘heathen, but not at all religious’. This view was based on comparison with the neighbouring island groups (Kei and Tanimbar), where people expressed religiosity through material culture in the form of ancestral figures carved in wood and in ritual speech performed at public gathering places in the villages. None of that applied to Aru, hence the notion that most Aru people were devoid of religiosity. In the same year, 1670, there is a note relating to Ujir stating that Muslim officials had been active in Ujir for 19 or 20 years and that they were a hindrance as they stopped children from attending the Protestant-run school in Wokam.

In sum, by the late 17th century the colonial-indigenous contact zone in Aru was concentrated in the two islands of Wasir and Ujir, the village Wokam on the western cape of the large island Wokam and the island Wamar. In this area indigenous religion, Islam and the Protestant church began to co-exist. The people east of these areas only engaged in local trade, which was of less interest to the VOC. In the VOC 1670 report on Aru, Batuley (Watteley) was mentioned, but only as a place name.

In 1857 the well known British naturalist Alfred Wallace spent a few months on Aru. Part of his time was in Dobo, which today is a bustling and growing town, but in Wallace’s days was a trading post where Muslim traders of different origins including Bugis and Chinese came to trade during the western monsoon, from January to June. For six weeks, Wallace stayed with indigenous peoples in the interior of Aru, collecting natural specimens including birds of paradise. Wallace’s account is limited in relation to religion, but still provides a sketch of the situation in the mid 19th century:

In the villages of Wamma, Wokan, and Maykor, are resident schoolmasters, sent by the Dutch Government from Amboyna, and the inhabitants are Christians; one or two other villages are Mahommedan, but all the rest of the population are pagans. As far as I could judge, however, there is very little difference in their degree of civilisation, that seeming to depend more on their proximity to Dobbo, and the amount of communication they have with the traders.

(Wallace 1858: 168)

In 1990, the population in Aru regency was just above 50,000. The majority were Protestants, while Indonesia as a whole had and still has a vast majority of Muslims. However, 25 years later, in 2015, the regency’s population was just above 90,000. The increase centred on the district capital Dobo, which became correspondingly more Muslim in character. Judging by the number of religious buildings in the regency, we can infer that approximately one-third of the population is Muslim. In 2015, the Aru regency had 113 Protestant churches, 77 mosques and 28 Catholic churches as well as one Buddhist temple; 35% of the religious buildings were mosques (Badan Pusat Statistik 2016: 59–60; 89).

Oral traditions from Aru: origins, creation and migration

In Aru, as elsewhere in eastern Indonesia, indigenous historical accounts often begin with apical ancestors; these sacral protagonists appear in either a creation or a migration story.

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5 VOC 1275 (1670) f. 379b–380b. The VOC sources cited in this article were generously shared and translated by Hans Hägerdal.
6 VOC 1281 (1670) f. 378.
7 VOC 1275 (1670) f. 379b–380b.
8 Dolcemasco (1996: 81–82) claims in 1990 that Protestants formed 90% of the population, Catholics 6% and Muslims 4%. This is disputable as the proportion of Muslims was probably higher than 4% in 1990.
The first ancestor to inhabit a site are the keepers of the land (Malay: *tuan tanah*), and in coastal areas the adjacent intertidal zone. Their descendants can claim customary rights to regulate the use of land and resources. It is the first ancestors and their descendants who allow later migrants to settle. In the case of Aru, oral traditions suggest that an influx of people was desired – often the *tuan tanah* used magic to lure or persuade new groups to join them.9

Stories about past times in Aru are full of movements: ancestors with magical powers could turn into a crocodile or ride a whale. Ordinary humans travelled in vessels ranging from dugout canoes to large boats called *kora-kora* with many men going to trade or to war. This waterborne mobility generated intricate networks of friends and foes. People commemorate individuals or groups crossing paths in oral traditions and in songs that they hand down through the generations.10 Some relationships were institutionalised as alliances. It was essential to keep up stability, both by upholding ties with ancestral lands and by retracing the ancestors’ travels: visiting and revisiting relatives and allies in different places.11

A special case in Aru and in some other parts of Maluku is the division of a larger area into two rival moieties. In Aru these are the Ursia and the Urlima, where Ursia means ninety (Batuley: *urser*) and Urlima is fifty (Batuley: *urlim*). As the stories go, there was a competition between the two lords, Ursi Duei (lord of Ursia) and Urim Duei (lord of Urlima), to attract the most villages. Ursi Duei rode a hammerhead shark while Urim Duei rode a whale. The shark was smaller and could enter shallow waters, so he got ninety villages, while the whale, who was restricted to deep water only, reached fifty villages (Gordon and Djonler 2019).

It is unclear how far back in time the Ursia and Urlima division was, but in a letter from the Governor of Banda and its dependencies to the *orangkaya* in Ujir (Oudjjer), Wangabel (Wongambel), Wokam, Wamar and the raja of Maikoor (Maykor) dated 1670, the governor urges them to cease mutual warfare and stand united. Specifically the governor stated that ‘the hateful names of Ulisiwa and Ulilima, which have caused so much warlike passion, should preferably be reduced to oblivion’.12 In the same letter, the governor reported that the Dutch were sending a preacher (*krankbezoecker*) and a schoolmaster to Aru to attend to spiritual matters, following repeated requests from leading figures in this part of Aru for Christian teachers. The two missionaries would arrive together with a corporal who had the task of purchasing as many slaves as he could buy from the Aru.13 As slaves mainly resulted from warfare, the urge for peace seems to be limited to the villages addressed in the letter, rather than encompassing the entire Aru region.

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9 See Fox and Sather (1996) for a view of tropes in indigenous historical traditions in the Austronesian context. For parallel cases in eastern Indonesia, see Wellfelt (2016).
10 Ujir songs take the form of short poems that are regarded as historical proof; the existence of a song means an event took place. Often songs are proof of historical alliances. A song needs extensive explanations to be comprehensible for an uninitiated observer. Songs are not central to the arguments we make here, hence we have chosen not to include this kind of material in the article.
11 See Kaartinen (2010) for an insightful account from Kei, showing the balance between place and travel in an island community.
12 VOC 1275 (1670) f. 382a–384b.
13 VOC 1275 (1670) f. 382a–384b.
**Stories from west to east**

In the following, we present oral historical traditions documented in Wasir-Ujir in the west and the Batuley area in the east. We have chosen to let the stories from the two areas run in parallel, as they speak of people and places with deep entanglements.

**Creation: Wasir and Ujir**

In the beginning of time, when God [Allah] created the lands of Aru, the first island to emerge from the sea was Wasir (Ujir Wati) then followed Ujir (Ujir Woi). In the south it was Enau and Karang that were first to rise from the sea. This is why Wasir and Ujir are perceived as the head of the Aru islands, while Enau and Karang are the tail.

(Interview with Jafar Hatala, 2013)

Oral traditions about ancestors’ lives and actions often have relevance to contemporary lives. As in written histories, people tend to include elements in their oral histories that work to their advantage. The following story about Ujir island and its inhabitants is an amalgamation of narratives recorded from two different sources. One is the late Jafar Hatala (d. 2016). He was the last person to have personal memories of life in Maiabil, the old village on the west coast of Ujir island. The other source is Latif Walai who is the imam in Ujir village and has ancestral ties to the east coast of the Island. The narratives differ in the details they give of the route taken by ancestors from the first village to the present village. Latif Walai’s version includes a period of settlement in the east coast of Ujir. This detail emphasises the land rights of people in his kinship group. However, this is not necessarily the reason why Jafar Hatala did not mention east Ujir; it might not have been his story to tell. Oral traditions in the history genre are inherited and owned by certain lineages, or bén groups; only senior male members of the correct group may narrate history even if everyone else knows the story.

**Early population in Ujir**

In Ujir, in the olden times, there were two groups of people living on the island, the forest people (Ujir bai) and the coastal people (Ujir folai). The latter stayed in a village called Lutia-bil (Ujir: luti stone, abil inside), as it was surrounded by a stone wall. At one time, these groups became united through marriage between Melangai, a man from the forest group and Ulfana, a young woman from the coastal group. This couple is the founding ancestor of the customary keepers of the land, the tuan tanah group in Ujir, called Jariri.

(Interview with Jafar Hatala, 2013)

The wedding took place at a site in the forest. The same day as the wedding, enemies attacked and destroyed Lutiabil. Instead of rebuilding the village, everybody moved. According to one version, they first settled in east Ujir, and then eventually moved to the old Ujir village, also known as Maiabil (Ujir: mai water, abil inside) as it is located by a river. In the other version, they moved directly from Lutiabil to Maiabil. Maiabil was the main settlement on Ujir island until the Second World War, when it was bombed and everybody resettled at the current location by the beach immediately south of the river.

(Interview with Jafar Hatala, 2013 and Latif Walay, imam in Ujir, 2016)

**The giant brothers Tafusi and Ngau-Ngau**

Haji Muraha Walai narrated the following story on two subsequent occasions. The main part was recorded when Wellfelt visited Wasir together with Haji Muraha and his wife...
Haja Sara. The day after this excursion Haji Muraha came to visit Wellfelt because he realised he had missed out an important part of the story: the part claiming that rice and other [foreign] crops magically appeared in Wasir. Stories about imported crops are common in eastern Indonesia; in the case of Wasir we know from a 1670 Dutch report that a considerable amount of rice was grown in Wasir.14 Aru is not a rice producing area; the staple food is (or was) sago. The claim made here, that these introduced crops in a sense are native, adds to the grandeur and significance of the ancestors in Wasir. The stories reinforce ideas relating to the descendants of certain groups, emphasising the status of their ancestors, perhaps as the earliest inhabitants of a certain place, thus passing on rights to ownership of land, and also by association with wealth, as in the case of the [foreign] crops that magically appear in Wasir in the following story. Wasir, an island that today does not have any permanent settlement, is repeatedly associated with expansive ambitions and power.

The most sacred story from Wasir concerns Tafusi and Ngau-Ngau. One day in the distant past, twin brothers originating from the upper world (Ujir: aras) appeared in Madamai on the west coast of Wasir. They were two very small baby boys, lying in a sling that was hanging from a butterfly tree (Malay: pohon daun kupu-kupu) when they were found by an elderly childless woman who had been down by the beach, searching for edibles at low tide as is the habit in these areas. The woman, thankful for the unexpected blessing of two children, took the babies with her as she walked home to the garden house where she lived with her husband.

As soon as the couple had taken care of the boys from the upper world, new crops appeared in the garden they were cultivating. Suddenly there were rice, wheat and mung beans growing in the garden, all because of the two children, who were named Tafusi and Ngau-ngau. The garden where these crops first appeared in Aru is called ‘rice garden’ (Ujir: kamata lau).

(Interview with Haji Muraha Walai, 2014)

Haji Muraha Walai, who shared the story, emphasised that the history of rice and other crops in Aru began there, in kamata lau – ‘It was not the Bugis or any other people who introduced rice to Aru as some claim. Rice was born in kamata lau.’15

Miraculously the children grew up in just a few months. Not only were they adults, they were giants. Tafusi settled in Madamai, while Ngau-ngau stayed a little to the south in Kolaterjuin. Many people came to fight with Tafusi in Madamai, but all failed. Tafusi had a bow with one arrow named Langa fo witin. He could shoot this arrow and tell it what to do – he might say ‘you hit 50 people and then come back’ and without fail the arrow would execute the orders of Tafusi. At one time Wasir was subjected to a major attack by enemies from north Aru and Papua, but Tafusi killed them all, took their skulls and placed them in a large hole that he covered with a stone called Belawil. Wasir was never defeated.

(Interview with Haji Muraha Walai, Wasir, 2014)

**Wasir and Ujir connections**

There are many links between the neighbouring islands Wasir and Ujir. Oral traditions, including songs, convey ancestors’ feelings of solitude, of being alone on an island with the sense of being alone in the world, and then the happiness and relief of realising there are friendly humans on the next island.

14VOC 1275 (1670) f. 379b-380b.
15Interview with Haji Muraha Walai (2014)
There was an increase in population according to the keepers of Wasir history who state that the island once had seven villages: five on the west coast and two on the east coast.\textsuperscript{16} From the lonely-friend stories, the narratives about Wasir changed to describe a place of fearsome and aggressive warriors who roamed around Aru, picking fights, killing people and bringing heads back to the island as proof of their bravery and power. Only the Ujir evaded Wasir belligerence because they had a special friendship; other less fortunate groups in Aru suffered defeat and submission.

Despite the aggressive image in relation to other communities in Aru, Wasir and Ujir have a history of receiving people from other parts of the archipelago and integrating them into the existing social structure. We do not know how this worked in the past, but today Ujir village has a non-hierarchical social structure well designed for absorbing individuals into the village community. The main instrument for incorporation is the bén system, which is a working community for distributing burdens and benefits among the villagers. Currently there are three bén in Ujir, and each unites several patrilineal families. Some lineages are of autochthonous origin, while others originate from other parts of Indonesia.

Below are two migrant stories, both illuminating the process of Islamisation in Aru. One tells of a group of people expelled from Mecca and Medina, who travelled to Wasir and beyond. The second story concerns another journey from Mecca, and the protagonist was a man who brought Islam to Wasir and Ujir.

\textit{Migrant story: (i) The Djonler clan’s journey}

According to one version of the Djonler clan history, the founding ancestor Djonler Duei originated from Mecca and Medina\textsuperscript{17} in the Middle East. He had remarkable abilities, such as healing the sick and reviving the dead. The people in his home land did not approve. They argued that that only God could have the power of such miracles, and accused Djonler Duei of trying to equate himself with God, and expelled him. That was when the ancestor of the Djonler clan began his journey to the east. As Djonler Duei set off, he brought his war clan Roiminag,\textsuperscript{18} the Felaway clan whose job was to be the steersmen, and slaves who had the task of bailing water out of the boat.

On their journey, Djonler Duei and his companions found many places; one of these was Seram, north of Aru. Some of the people on the boat decided to settle there; these are the Derlen clan and the Henderlen clan who still live in Seram, especially in Gorom and Geser.\textsuperscript{19} The rest of the party continued their quest to the east and reached Aru.

(\textit{Interview with Simon Djonler, 2010})

Not all elders in the Djonler clan agree that Djonler Duei came from Mecca and Medina, but there is consensus about the later steps in the story, when the Djonler clan travelled from east Seram to Wasir, and later migrated to other parts of Aru.\textsuperscript{20}

It is common for eastern Indonesian ancestral migration stories to have a prestigious place as the origin of the founding ancestors. In some areas, the reference is to the

\textsuperscript{16}Interview with Haji Muraha Walai (2014) and Haji Kamala Bolibole (2017). The names of the abandoned villages in Wasir are Madamai, Lemijuin, Alfefa, Karatin, Selfani, Watifana and Kainasiabil.
\textsuperscript{17}Batuley: \textit{Mak je Madin}.
\textsuperscript{18}Batuley: roi – to avert, minag – weapon or gun.
\textsuperscript{19}The Derlen and Henderlen clans are still regarded as relatives of the Djonler clan. Seram and Aru have an alliance (pela) which is assumed to pre-date the arrival of the Djonler Duei. There is a branch of the Derlen clan in Ujir (interview with Mukim Derlen/Bolibole, 2013), whose great-grandfather moved from east Seram and settled in Ujir.
\textsuperscript{20}Interview with Margaretha Djonler (2017) and Ngalja Djonler (2018).
famous kingdom of Majapahit in Java. In this case, though disputed, it is interesting that the ancestral origin coincides with the origin of Islam. The reference to Goram makes sense, as there are strong connections with Goram. Wallace (1890: 329), who stayed in the Aru trade post Dobo in 1857, stated that some of the traders were Makassar or Bugis men from Sulawesi, ‘but more from the small island of Goram, at the east end of Ceram, whose inhabitants are the petty traders of the far East’. The Djonler migration story contains a characteristic mix of intention, chance and magic. In Aru the migrating group connects with autochthonous ancestors, the tuan tanah, who in the story receive the newcomers, which gives them legitimate rights to settle and have a share in natural resources.

As the boat with Djonler Duei and his ship’s company approached Aru, the founding ancestor of the indigenous Mangar clan saw the passing boat and told the ancestor of the indigenous Malagwar clan to invite them to Maikoor. The ancestors had magical powers, so the Malagwar Duei transformed himself into a crocodile and went to meet the boat. As the people on the boat spotted the approaching predator, Roiminag Duei from the war clan speared it. The ancestor-crocodile dragged the boat, but instead of bringing them to Maikoor, he towed the newcomers to Wasir, hoping they might pass on some of the magical power from Djonler Duei.

When they reached Wasir island, Djonler Duei told the leader of the warrior clan to kill whatever it was that had dragged them to the island. Roiminag Duei dived into the water to slay the crocodile but realised it was a man. Roiminag Duei and Malagwar Duei held a meeting in a cave by the beach Bel Nar-Nar in Wasir. This meeting resulted in the decision that the visitors on the boat should settle on the island.21

Migrant story: (ii) The holy man (wali) from Mecca

The second oral tradition about migrants from the Middle East was narrated by Haji Muraha Walai. It is a sacred story he could share because he is the senior member of the lineage that guards an old Qur’an that is associated with the man who brought Islam to Wasir and Ujir, and a senior representative of a lineage from Wasir.22

At the outset of the story, seven holy men (wali) left the Holy Land to spread the teachings of the Prophet Muhammed. The seven wali travelled together towards the east. When they reached the eastern parts of present-day Indonesia, they began to settle in different locations. One stayed in Buton, southeast of Sulawesi. Buton was the meeting place of the seven wali. Another went to stay at the keraton (palace) in Bau-bau, also on Buton Island a third wali settled in the kingdom (kesunanan) of Bone in southwest Sulawesi. A fourth wali went to Tidore in north Maluku. Two wali locations are unknown. The seventh wali, who brought the old Qur’an to Ujir, went furthest to the east; he travelled towards the setting sun and ended up in Wasir. This wali settled in Karatin, which according to oral tradition used to be a large village on the west coast of Wasir, and the site where the first mosque in Aru was built.

While Wasir is a famous place in Aru traditions, it was at some point abandoned. Currently there are only staff from a fish farm staying permanently on Wasir. A few villagers

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21 The cave is today a sacred site, associated with both local ancestral beliefs and Islam.

22 It was very important to Haji Muraha that Wasir and Ujir are given credit for the entrance of Islam in Aru. The story belongs there, not in the town of Dobo or with some government institution. He explicitly rejected the idea that Islam was introduced to Ujir from Seram or by the Bugis in Sulawesi as some claim. According to Haji Muraha there is no connection with the wali songo, the holy men who are credited with introducing Islam to Java.
from Ujir have gardens in Wasir that they tend occasionally. People from Ujir also visit for spiritual reasons as the island has sacred sites.

**The flight from Wasir**

There are two different discourses about a great exodus from Wasir. One claim is that it was due to Islam, another that it was due to a war with Papuans. According to Haji Muraha, the new religion caused a major depopulation of Wasir.

At one point, the population faced the choice of converting to Islam or leaving. It was the fear of circumcision that drove many people to flee from Wasir. Some moved as far as Papua to avoid having to become Muslims. This exodus is the reason why there are people all over Aru who can rightfully claim origins from Wasir. The group that chose Islam also left Wasir and settled with the wali at a site upriver from the old Ujir village (Maabil). The site was called Walai Tina Fana. Later the wali moved in with the villagers in Ujir where he became a religious teacher and the first imam of Ujir.

(Interview with Haji Muraha Walai, 2014)

In another version, taken from the Djonler clan history, it was a major attack by Papuans that caused the diaspora from Wasir. Similar narratives about an attack by Papuans, or by people coming from the north, also exist in Ujir. The main spokesperson for Wasir history, Haji Muraha, agreed that Wasir was attacked by Papuans, but strongly rejected that anyone could defeat Wasir as their ancestors were invincible.

According to the story documented in Benjuring village (Batuley area on the east coast), the four clans led by Djonler Duei had lived peacefully in Wasir for a few generations when people from Wasir found two princesses from western Papua drifting in a boat. They captured the girls and brought them back to Wasir. The girls’ family learnt what had happened and organised a massive attack on Wasir, with warriors encircling the island and killing people in revenge for the kidnapping.

Following the war, the Djonler clan left Wasir. Most settled in a village between the islands of Wasir and Ujir called Gojir Fanu Jaja. The rest moved further: some stayed in Kola, some settled in the east coast, while others went on, circumnavigating the archipelago as far as Rebi on the west coast.

(Interview with Karolus Djonler, 2018)

Wherever members of the Djonler clan settled, they changed their clan name in accordance with the local language (see Table 1). Descendants of the founding ancestor Djonler Duei, regardless of clan name, have the same totemic animals of octopus and squid. It is believed that Djonler Duei can transform himself into one of those creatures, or into a snake. Sacred pillars (Batuley: *tiang mosmosim*) in houses belonging to members of the Djonler clan always have a carving of an octopus or squid, and to this day, members of the Djonler clan do not eat octopus or squid.

**Islam in Ujir: the dog faeces incident**

As mentioned, most Djonlers went from Wasir to stay in Gojir Fanu Jaja (*Gojir* is Batuley for Ujir), between Wasir and Ujir islands, at a site belonging to the autochthonous Mangar clan.\(^{23}\)

\(^{23}\)It is not clear if this is a mythological or actual site.
One day, a fight between the people on the boat and the Mangar Fanu Duei, the customary owner of the village, caused the village to sink. Since then the submerged village has been known as *fanu teitai*. The four clans instead settled in the old Ujir village within the river mouth (Maiabil).

(Interview with Simon Djonler, 2010)

Eventually Islam was introduced to Ujir village and most of the Djonler clan, who counted Mecca and Medina as their place of origin, converted to Islam. These new Muslims tried to convert other members of the clan, but not everybody appreciated this.

One day, a non-Muslim Djonler had had enough of being preached at. He prepared an *iban*, which is a kind of dish where sago powder is wrapped (sometimes mixed with grated coconut) in sago leaves and placed on a fire until cooked. However, he put *tara sai* (Batuley: dog faeces) in the *iban*. When a Muslim clan member wanted to eat the *iban* he found that somebody had put dog faeces inside. This was not only disgusting, but an insult directed towards Muslims as dogs are ritually impure, *haram*, according to their religious teachings.

(Interview with Robu Roiminag, 2017)

The prank, known as *peristiwa iban tara sai* provoked a quarrel resulting in a serious rift between the Muslims and the non-Muslims in the Djonler clan. Later the non-Muslims in the Djonler clan moved to Batuley on the east coast to avoid further conflicts. Many Muslim clan members remained in Ujir. While known under the names Jaririr Baulenga and Jaririr Jongnongoi, both were branches of the Djonler clan. Robu Roiminang, who is the imam of Benjuring in the Batuley area shared this story. His father was the first to convert to Islam in Benjuring. There is similar story in Ujir about a man who punished his lazy brother by serving him an *iban* with dog faeces, which points to a narrative closeness between Muslims in Ujir and in Batuley.

A Dutch description of Ujir in 1670

Oral traditions from Wasir and Ujir, as well as from the Djonler clan in Batuley on the east coast, describe a time in Ujir village when only part of it was Muslim, which caused tension. These oral accounts resonate with a description of Ujir from a VOC report in 1670:

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24Batuley: *fanu* – village, *teitai* is an adjective referring to something watery.
Odjier has two negeri [villages]. There is a freshwater river. One can enter there with a sloop and fasten it to the poles of the houses. It has two negeris of which the one below has most of the Moors. There is a priest [paap] or kasisi there, who is a Malay, as well as a few mudim [junior Muslim officials]. However, the higher situated negeri is mostly heathen. Because of that there is often dispute between the two negeris, since the higher situated does not want to be Moor. However, as time passes there are some who become Moors through protracted insistence.

Previously the Makassar people conducted substantial shipping here, through which the Moorish creed was planted among them, as they persuaded the Aru people and sometimes brought them to Makassar for that purpose.

Odjier is well provided with provisions, more so than Wokam, because of the island Wassier which is situated opposite and delivers a lot of rice. There is a negeri which is also mostly Moorish and a dependency of the negeri Odjier.25

This source supports the oral traditions claiming that Ujir at one stage was divided between Muslims and non-Muslims, and that there was friction between the two groups, and pressure to convert. The idea that Islam was introduced by Makassar is strongly rejected in Ujir, nonetheless looking at the larger picture of Islamisation in eastern Indonesia the reference to a Makassar presence in the village in 1670 is worth noting.26 The information that rice was abundant in Wasir also appears in oral traditions, according to which people in Wasir were eager not to let other places in Aru grow rice.27

Islam and eastern Aru

Ujir eventually became an entirely Muslim village. Here we will follow the Djonler who, according to their own traditions, left Ujir because they did not want to convert to Islam. To avoid conversion they settled in the Batuley area in the east. Below, we present oral traditions about Batuley history, with a special focus on narratives about Islam. This is not a full account of Islam in eastern Aru, but the traditions from one area.

The Batuley-speaking community

Batuley is the name of an island, a village, and one of the minor languages in the Aru archipelago.28 The Batuley speakers currently inhabit seven villages on six islands. From north to south these are Aduar (Benjuring village and Kabalsiang village), Kumul (Kumul village), Batuley (Batuley village), Waria (Waria village), Jurusiang (Jurusiang village), Sewer (Sewer village).29 The inhabitants in the Batuley area share the local language

25VOC 1275 (1670) f. 379b–380b.
26Makassar [Gowa] was Islamised in the early 17th century and soon became active in proselytising, propagating a Sufi form of Islam (Laffan 2011). The VOC conquered Makassar in 1669. For a discussion on the influence of Makassar in the periphery of central Maluku in the period, see Niemeijer (2001: 257–259).
27Wasir is said to have had a monopoly on rice-growing in Aru. One popular story tells of a man who managed to steal a rice seed, which caused great rage in Wasir. It is possible that the idea of controlling seed supply was inspired by the VOC attempts to monopolise nutmeg and mace in Banda.
28Batuley is the name in Dobo Malay. To native speakers the correct term is Gwatle, which derives from Gwat li where gwat means ‘big channel’ and li, a cave. The village of origin lies by a wide channel leading through a mangrove area; at the back of the village is a cave, hence the place name is the result of a lexicalisation process beginning with the description of the site. In this article, we have chosen to use the Malay term Batuley as that is the established term outside the local community.
29There is also the village Kobamar with a mixed population of Batuley, Manumbai, and Kola speakers. Kobamar is a Protestant village that in 1996 had 193 inhabitants.
and the concept of one village of origin. Each of the hived-off Batuley villages has a separate and complex history. Parallel to the village histories, are clan histories where a fundamental element is whether a clan is the first to settle and thus hold the position as the traditional keepers of the land, the tuan tanah, or whether they have moved into a settled area.

One example of this is Aduar island where the indigenous Mangar clan were the first inhabitants. When members of the Djonler clan settled on the same island, founding the village Benjuring, the Mangar clan moved to Lorang where they changed their clan name to Ganobal (i.e. nobal jiinjin), which means ‘those who sail across the ocean’. Since then, the village of Benjuring and the village of Lorang have a special connection called jabu.

The story of Rar Kada

Some oral traditions among the Batuley-speaking community explain why their ancestors left the original Batuley village. One of these stories tells of a conflict which erupted in the village following the rape and murder of a young woman, Rar Kada (peristiwa Rar Kada).

Rar Kada was a young woman of exceptional beauty. She belonged to a highly respected family in Batuley. Every man in the village wanted to marry her, but she was full of conceit. Each time a man approached her, asking her to marry him, she would spit and say ‘you are not worthy of sleeping with me, only with my spit’. Rar Kada’s attitude caused much anger and resentment among the growing number of rejected young men.

One day when she went out to catch fish and crabs in the intertidal zone, the young men captured Rar Kada, raped and killed her. Finally, they threw her abused body at the back of the village. When the young woman’s family found her dead body, a war between villagers was unavoidable. The conflict caused people of Batuley to move out. Some of Rar Kada’s relatives went as far as the Kei islands to avoid contact with Batuley people. They settled in a village now called Yam Timur.

Islam in the Batuley area

Another salient explanation for the dispersal from Batuley island is the introduction of Islam to the original village on the island. Those who preferred to hold on to the old ways – or according to Muslim sources, were afraid of circumcision – left, including some of the Djonler clan who took refuge in Aduar island where part of the clan had earlier settled in the old Benjuring village (Benjuring Fanu Jaja). This move to avoid Islam took place four generations ago.

Once some Muslims from Ujir had settled in Batuley, they brought the religion to Waria and Jurusiang, two other Batuley-speaking villages. With Islam established in the Batuley area, Muslims from Ujir and Samang (northwest Aru) and from Goram

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30 Interview with Simon Djonler (2010).
31 A jabu relation is an alliance with an element of kinship. For example, one has to be respectful to a jabu and if the jabu wants something you have to give it without expecting anything in return. However, there is no intermarriage between jabu. Lorang is a separate Aru language spoken only in the village with the same name. Today Lorang is a Protestant village.
32 Narrated by Simon Djonler (2010) and other Djonler’s elders. The story was shared with Sonny Djonler in preparation for his participation in the Bupati election 2010. Simon Djonler (1960–2011) was tuan tanah of Benjuring.
(Seram) as well as Arabs came to trade and helped build a mosque and other facilities. For instance, people from Ujir helped to dig a well to secure water supplies in Waria village. Today Ujir has a religious alliance (*pela agama*) with Waria and Jurusiang, based on these conversion efforts.³⁴

Meanwhile, other villages such as Kumul, Benjuring and Kabalsiang continued to adhere to their traditional beliefs though their attempts to avoid the new religions eventually failed. The first scriptural religion to gain a foothold in Benjuring was Islam. As can be seen from the story below, the actions of one young individual and his influential Muslim relative in the Ujir area brought about a change that took place in the early 20th century.

**The first convert to Islam in Benjuring**

The following story was narrated by Robu Roiminag, the imam in Benjuring and son of the protagonist Bekor, who was probably born in the 1920s. This story is closer in time than others included here, as shown by the way it was narrated and the details given.

The first convert to Islam in Benjuring was a boy named Bekor Roiminag. He converted in Ujir and then went with his relative Bangi to stay in Samang, a village that was founded by people from Ujir. When Bekor’s uncle Roingoran Roiminag heard what had happened, he went to Samang to collect his nephew. On their way back to Benjuring, Roingoran took Bekor’s new Muslim cap and his letter of conversion, and spoke to the sun: ‘I give this cap and this letter back to their owner, the tide may take them anywhere in this universe. I take my child back, so that he may be a non-convert like us, so that we do not have prohibitions, because this religion [Islam] has many prohibitions that we cannot cope with.’ Back in Benjuring, they forced Bekor to eat green turtle, which is against the teachings of Islam.

Learning this, Bangi, who had helped the boy convert, called for his allies (*pela*) in Koba, asking them to join him with their large canoes (*kora-kora*) to go to Benjuring. In Benjuring, Bangi took the boy Bekor on board and brought him back to Samang. The people in Benjuring did not dare to do anything because Bangi was a fluent Malay speaker and a friend of Raja Durjela and the Dutch, while uncle Roingoran and his family did not speak Malay nor did they have contacts with local or colonial rulers.

Bekor lived as a Muslim in Samang until he was an adult. Then at one point there was an issue to do with inheritance. Meilo Roiminag, one of the elders in the Roiminag clan in Benjuring, asked Bekor’s uncle Roingoran to bring Bekor back – otherwise, there would be no sago trees for Roingoran and his family as all the trees belonged to Bekor’s father. Roingoran once again went to Samang. This time he asked permission from Bangi to bring Bekor back to Benjuring. Bangi agreed on condition that Bekor would remain Muslim. If not, Bangi would report Roingoran to the raja of Durjela. This is how Bekor came back with Islam to Benjuring.

( Interview with Robu Roiminag, 2017)

The story points to the importance of education. Malay was the language used by the Dutch colonial administration. After independence, Indonesian became the official language. Without the language or contacts with powerful people, the villagers in Benjuring were at the mercy of the better educated who also held high positions.

³⁴Interview with Afdola Korisen (2017).
Table 2. Religious diversity in the Batuley area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Village name</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Religions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benjuring</td>
<td>585</td>
<td>Catholic, Protestant, Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kabalsiang</td>
<td>567</td>
<td>Catholic, Protestant, Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumul</td>
<td>653</td>
<td>Catholic, Protestant, Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Batuley</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waria</td>
<td>455</td>
<td>Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jurusiang</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sewer</td>
<td>339</td>
<td>Islam</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Religious diversity in Batuley

Table 2 above shows four Batuley-speaking fully Muslim villages, while three villages are a mix of Catholics, Protestants and Muslims. The latter pattern is an effect of the 1977 elections when the Indonesian New Order regime put strong pressure on all citizens to adhere to one of the five world religions that the state allowed (Spyer 1996). Scriptural religion was strongly associated with modernity, and to ‘not yet have religion’ (belum beragama), as was common in the Batuley area, was stigmatising proof of being backward. In addition, adhering to a religion was implicit proof of not being communist and thus an enemy of the military regime in Indonesia. When elections came in 1977 people in Batuley had the communist purge of 1965–66 fresh in their memory. During that turbulent period people who were associated with the Indonesian Communist Party, the PKI, were imprisoned or randomly executed. A decade later, when forced to choose a world religion, some families who previously had held onto their own traditions and beliefs decided to spread the risk by placing their children (sons) in different religions.

Religious practices: indigenous beliefs and Muslim entanglements

Alongside modern religions, most Batuley people also live by their traditional beliefs. Customs or adat are, like daily life, oriented towards the sea and the intertidal zone. For the people of Batuley there is another world under the sea. In that world live spiritual creatures unseen by human eyes, known as tei juere (people of the sea). This interconnectedness between land and sea begins at birth. After childbirth, the placenta (kufkufal) is placed in the sea. The placenta is the elder sibling (kagen) of the newborn child, and has sacrificed himself or herself to save the newly born and to protect the child through life. A Batuley boy who becomes a diver has a placenta sibling who will guide him in the spiritual undersea world.

Most Batuley men are divers and spend part of their life in the other world where they will have a kodar teitai (sea wife) who helps them during their dives. The main ritual, the tambaroro, marks the opening of the diving season in Batuley. During the tambaroro, a man has to pay respect and offer gifts to his sea wife so as to have a good yield.

37Batuley divers specialise in pearl oysters. The object of a man’s affection on land and in the sea are mirror images: if a man is married when he finds his first pearl oyster clam, the assumption is that his sea wife looks exactly like his real wife. If he is unmarried, the sea wife looks like the girlfriend of his desire.
The kofja in Benjuring – magic material culture with many connotations

In Benjuring village stands a small house used for *adat* meetings (Batuley: *lef laui*). The Sareman clan guards the house and members of the clan are therefore identified as the custodians of *adat* in Batuley villages. Within the house is a special chest (*kofja*). A member of the Sareman clan is the keeper of the *kofja*. Only certain people may see the contents. Some say it holds a chapter or *surah* of the Qur’an (Arab/Malay: *Yasin*), [Dutch] coins from different times and a white cloth. Since a year, at the start of the pearl diving season, the keeper or the *kofja* smokes the white cloth with incense to predict the outcome of the dive period. When the smoke touches the cloth, Arabic scripture will appear if it is a fortunate year, if not, the harvest of pearls or sea cucumbers, which are both important export products, will be poor.39

Version A: the kofja and the moieties Urlima and Ursia

There are two different stories about the origins of the *kofja*. The Sareman clan, whose members are the keepers of the relic, is one of the native clans in Aru.40 In one version, the Sareman clan used to live in the original village in Batuley. They were the guardians of a ritual house in the original village Batuley, and the keepers of a *kofja*, which contained the rules of Urlima, one of the moieties in Aru.

According to the story, a man called Matoli who was a member of the Sareman clan had the bad habit of peeping at bathing women. One day, some villagers caught him in the act and beat him. The rest of his clan felt so ashamed that they decided to move from Batuley village to settle on Kola island instead.

News about the event reached the *tuan tanah* in Aduar island who realised there was a big problem with the move: the Sareman clan were the keepers of the *kofja* containing deep secrets about the Urlima moiety. Now they were planning to move to Kolmar in Kola, a village belonging to the competing moiety Ursia.

When the Sareman clan boat passed a cape at Aduar island, the *tuan tanah* applied magic to make the tide recede suddenly, leaving the boat with the Sareman clan stranded in the intertidal zone. The *tuan tanah* went to meet them and invited them ashore for food and talks. The Sareman clan accepted this invitation, and eventually they decided to settle at that cape on Aduar island.

(Interview with Simon Djonler, 2010)

The new village on the cape was about a kilometre from the old village of Aduar, and the village was named Benjuring.41 The name alludes to the *tuan tanah* receiving advanced news about the threatening move. Once the Sareman clan had established the new village in Benjuring, they built a new ritual house there and placed the *kofja* in it.

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38 Robu Roiminag, imam in Benjuring, stated in an interview (2017), that he saw the entire contents of the *kofja* in 1965, but that the contents are now gone. According to him he saw Muslim garments (*a boju sadria*, *a jubah*, a *lenso* and a *gamis*); four plates with Arabic inscriptions naming the four friends of Muhammed: Abubakar, Umar, Usman, and Ali, and the four angels Jibrael, Mikael, Israfel, Ijrael; a gold coin; one complete copy of the Qur’an; three ‘small’ Qur’an (*yasin*) each consisting of one page between one and two metres in length, inscribed in red ink.


40 The clan name is actually Gwadar, which is considered too sacred to be used as a name. The clan has branches in different parts of Aru, and these have taken different names (compare Djonler in Table 1). Sareman is the Batuley word for trevally fish (*Carangidae*).

41 Batuley: *ben* – news, *juring* – before or ‘something comes in front’.
Version B: The kofja of the Arab Habib Torfoloi

In the other version, the Sareman moved from the original village of Batuley and settled in Benjuring on Aduar where they built a ritual house, like the one they had had in the old village but they did not yet have the kofja. This was brought to Benjuring by an Arab called Habib Torfoloi.42

A woman from the Mangar clan had observed how the small boat which the Arab man sailed in, shone with light through the night. At dawn the light went out. She took this as a sign that he was either a holy man or the Lord of Urlima and went to tell the women in the Sareman clan. The head of the Sareman clan met with Habib Torfoloi and they became friends. The Habib gave his friend the kofja on condition that whoever kept it could not eat pork, and since that time the Sareman clan does not eat pork.

(Interview with Afdola Korisen, 2017)

Both stories exist in tandem. Some support the idea of the kofja being a heirloom associated with the old customs, others uphold the connection with the Arab Muslim Habib Torfoloi. The competing stories caused some trouble following the forced conversions during the 1977 elections. People in the Batuley area chose a religion to avoid being branded as members of the PKI. Many went to Ujir to convert to Islam; others chose the Protestant Church of Maluku (Gereja Protestan Maluku), yet others were received into the Roman Catholic Church – and the keeper of the kofja in Benjuring was one of them. Clan members who had chosen Islam demanded that they, not a Catholic, should keep the kofja. The kofja was handed to a Muslim man in the village, but he was dogged by misfortune and eventually brought the kofja back to the traditional keeper and the old ritual house at the front of the village.43 Thus, in Benjuring a Catholic ritually restricted from eating pork reads magical Arab script to predict the harvest for divers who enter the underwater world where their underwater wives and placenta siblings help them as they search for precious oysters. As Islam has influenced indigenous beliefs in Benjuring, there is also the reverse happening in Ujir. People in Ujir are diligent Muslims, but still maintain a close relationship with their ancestors.

The sacred graves in Wasir

There are three sacred sites in Wasir. One is a grave in Madamai, which is that of Tafusi, the giant war leader. He was seven metres tall and his grave is nine metres long. He had big feet and when he walked along the beach one stride for him was like a hundred for an ordinary human. Another grave is in Kolaterjuin. That grave is mysterious as it tends to disappear and re-appear, and few people have seen it. The third grave is within the cave at Bel Nar-Nar.44 This grave is attributed both to the giant ancestor Ngau-ngau and to the wali who brought Islam to Wasir and Ujir.

People from Ujir visit the sacred graves to ask for help from the ancestor who will act as a mediator to God or Allah. As Haji Muraha explained: ‘It is not that these ancestors are God, but they are closer to God than ordinary people.’45 The ancestors

43Interview with Robu Roiminag (2017).
are asked to assist in all matters of life, including going on the hajj to Mecca. Before leaving, the pilgrim will ask for guidance from one of the ancestors, and upon arrival in Ujir immediately after thanksgiving in the mosque, a small ceremony is held at the home of the pilgrim. Prayers, food and water are consumed in a separate room, and thanks are given to the ancestor for his guidance. Thereafter a feast celebrating the return of the new haji or haja commences. The sacred graves in Wasir are also visited for good luck by outsiders, including Christians of Chinese descent living in Dobo.

**Final discussion**

The history of the spread of Islam in Indonesia is a challenging subject that calls for a multifaceted approach and an open mind to sources that might elucidate the long and still ongoing process. As we have shown here, there are informative archival and published written sources from colonial times. Archaeological investigations are under way, which is promising. A preliminary study concluded that ‘The discoveries in Ujir hint that a more complex picture of wider trading relationships within the Moluccas, before the presence of Europeans, waits to be unfolded’ (Veth et al. 2006: 92).

The story about Islam in Wasir and Ujir presents an interesting network of Muslim realms in the eastern part of maritime Southeast Asia. Though it is beyond the scope of this article, it would be interesting to analyse what the implications are of situating Wasir-Ujir together with the Muslim courts mentioned, while refuting association with other important Muslim strongholds.

The main objective of this article has been to examine indigenous oral traditions about the spread of Islam in the Aru islands. To this end, an obvious approach was to enquire into sources in Muslim communities and to focus on the historical centre for Islam in Aru, the islands Wasir and Ujir in the northwest. We know from Dutch sources that people in Ujir began to embrace Islam at the latest in the 1650s. While the written archive underlines the importance of Muslim traders in the spread of Islam, local sources point to Muslim missionaries or wali as the main influence. The stories that keepers of history in Ujir have shared provide a rare insight into indigenous views of the past in a community without ruling strata. In Ujir, conversion is not accredited to the magic enlightenment of a king, as is the case in many other parts of Indonesia (Jones 1979). Instead, the oral sources convey a high degree of individual agency and an extended process where some decided to embrace Islam while others did not.

Another perspective here is that of non-Muslims living in close contact with Islam. One cluster of oral traditions was documented in Benjuring, in the Batuley-speaking area on the east coast of Aru. Most people in Benjuring adhered to local ancestral beliefs until the 1970s when they were forced to choose a state-approved religion. It is evident from their accounts that being non-Muslim did not mean that they were unaffected by Islam. In line with the arguments of Bulliet (2010), oral traditions in Ujir and Benjuring demonstrate the complex, entangled and processual nature of conversion. We argue that they also demonstrate the potential to learn from listening to the historical experiences that are conveyed through oral traditions. Oral traditions from Wasir-Ujir in the west and the Batuley area in the east help to qualify the
concept of conversion. To become the first Muslim in Aru in the 1650s would have been a very different experience from becoming the first Muslim in Benjuring 300 years later. In both cases, it must have taken courage. The ethnographical data from our investigation in Aru show that the presence of Islam has affected non-Muslim communities deeply, but also that local ancestral beliefs are far from absent in the traditional centre of Islam in Aru.

Maluku was the scene of much inter-religious violence between 1999 and 2002. The Aru case demonstrates that historical connections can bridge religious differences. The co-author here, Sonny Djonler, is an example of this: while a Catholic from Benjuring, he has Muslim kin in Ujir and the traditional right to access their sago gardens. If wisely applied, the epistemic incentive for oral traditions in Aru – knowing your history relates you to your land – can be an important peacekeeping factor.

As stated, the spread of Islam is an ongoing process in Indonesia, and Aru is no exception. This coincides with other ongoing processes such as urbanisation, population growth and migration, uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources, and the effects of climate change on the low-lying tropical islands of the Aru archipelago. The point of gravity for Islam in Aru has moved from Wasir-Ujir to the district capital Dobo, which is no longer the seasonal trade post that Wallace visited in 1857. It is an open question how the ancestors will fare in the new urban setting.

Finally, we argue that, problematic as they may be, local oral traditions can provide a valuable contribution to the study of the history of the spread of Islam in Indonesia. This is especially valid for areas like Aru where written sources are of European, mostly colonial, origin, and the voice of the colonised has not been heard.

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